

The Politics of American Actor Training

Edited by

**Ellen Margolis and
Lissa Tyler Renaud**



The Politics of American Actor Training

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Edited by Ellen Margolis and Lissa

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ROUTLEDGE

Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

New York London

First published 2010
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2009.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The politics of American actor training / edited by Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud.

p. cm.—(Routledge advances in theatre and performance studies ; 11)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Acting—Study and teaching—United States. 2. Drama in education—United States. I. Margolis, Ellen, 1959– II. Renaud, Lissa Tyler.

PN2075.P65 2009

792.02'807073—dc22

2009016040

ISBN 0-203-86777-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0-415-80121-4 (hbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-86777-7 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-80121-8 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-86777-8 (ebk)

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Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank those who supported our work on this book:

Julia Alderson, Kiril Bolotnikov, Norma Bowles, Harry Elam, Rinda Frye, Laura Gattoni, Robert Goldsby, Breanna Grove, Les Hasbargen, Elizabeth Levine, Alfonso Lopez-Vasquez, Terry O'Day, the Pacific University College of Arts & Sciences, Ryan Reed, Harriet Renaud, Roxane Rix, Bill Smith, Karima Wilner, Leigh Woods, our many anonymous readers, and our families.

Special thanks to Talia Rodgers of Routledge, London; to our production coordinator, Terence James Johnson; and to our editor, Erica Wetter.

Introduction

Ellen Margolis and Lissa Tyler Renaud

In place of politics of serious public issues, one that engages the public broadly, we have politics defined broadly by entertainment and television values—image, artificial bids for attention span, spin and the rest—and narrowly by what are called “wedge issues,” representations of ideological hysteria. All these developments have consequences for artistic content.

Michael Janeway, *American Theatre*, 2000¹

Put these two train wrecks together: first, the explosion of the Entertainment Industry, defining so much of our culture and our economy, filling so much of the vacuum in our political culture. Second, the “culture wars”—the shift into escapism, identity politics, consumer gadgetry, cults of markets and money. Add those all up, and it’s hardly surprising that there is so little today of what theatre is historically about: a theatre of ideas and of the soul.

Ibid.²

It is surprising that there isn’t already a book addressing how these developments are reflected in actor training. We have heard these matters debated in the proverbial hallway conversation for many years, expressed informally in half-formed anxieties and experiential knowledge about power relationships. When the editors of this book brought forth these issues in a panel session at the 2004 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Conference in Toronto, there was consensus from an exciting mix of academic and professional theatre people that the topic of actor training and its politics—the powerful undercurrents of their professions—needed to be formalized in fully-articulated, published, and disseminated work. We have been galvanized by enthusiastic remarks, in subsequent private discussions and public presentations, that such a project is “long overdue.” Although there are certainly well-known books on specific approaches to acting, anthologies of essays from theoretical and historical perspectives on acting, and individual articles that explore some of the challenges of actor education, questions about the politics of acting pedagogy in the U.S. have not heretofore been treated in a single volume.

As co-editors, we have gathered an impressive group of theatre scholars, professionals, and teachers to write on “the politics of American actor training.” Here, thirteen prominent academics and artists view actor training through a political, cultural, or ethical lens. We invited our writers to tackle fraught topics about power as it plays out in American acting curricula and classrooms, asking them to address their pieces to people at the top of the profession, to those who are unfamiliar with important, prevalent questions about our nation’s acting training as it now stands, and to anyone in a position to make concrete changes. Consequently, the book not only identifies complex issues and assesses them, but also proposes new and practicable ideas to serve administrators, department chairs, conservatory heads, teachers, critics, as well as students and actors. Our collective aim has been to assess current and past training policies and practices, and to propose new ideas that will inform twenty-first-century actor training in America.

* * *

The title of the book communicates one of our highest priorities: to challenge professional American actor training in the full range of its settings—universities, conservatories, institutes, private studios large and small, and inside and outside the U.S.—that is, wherever professional American actor training may be found. Other choices followed from this fundamental decision to be inclusive in this sense. For example, we chose not to divide scholars and practitioners, but instead to encourage chapters from both sides of the figurative aisle. We were struck by the writers’ interest in being part of a book that set aside conventional divisions, and were deeply impressed that so many of them have the expertise to combine both theoretical and practical perspectives in their chapters. In addition to their academic degrees, the authors all work in positions of responsibility in the world of acting training, and all add compelling views from their particular trenches. Therefore, the resulting book features chapters from a wide range of disparate voices—from theorists, directors, and teachers, to administrators, actors, and historians. In support of this range, we chose not to strive for consistency of tone, but to encourage widely differing writing styles, from the experiential to the theoretical, and from the meditative to the statistical.

Yet another outgrowth of our choice to look beyond the usual categories of practice and theory was our decision to highlight actor training across the country, because the editors represent the many who disagree with the premise that the best of the training happens at a handful of elite East Coast schools. The methods of schools such as Julliard, NYU, Carnegie Mellon, Yale School of Drama, Neighborhood Playhouse, Stella Adler Conservatory, and the Actors Studio dominate the popular image of and mainstream discourse on actor training. The realities of actor training across the nation, however, encompass a wide spectrum of complex factors, and our

goal has been to focus on many of these widely unacknowledged complexities, to give a truer, more inclusive picture of American actor training.

It comes as no surprise that acting teachers accustomed to thinking of themselves as defining American training, can feel challenged by questions that persist nationwide about the assumptions that were inherent in their own training and in the training they offer. This book intends to give a fair hearing to persistent, questioning voices, thereby contributing to the national dialogue the diverse perspectives and proposals needed to keep American actor training dynamic and germane, both within the U.S. and abroad.

* * *

Scrutiny of the teacher–student relationship has a long history, and many have written on the transmission, use, and maintenance of power in the academy. In our time, Paulo Freire’s seminal work on the colonialism inherent in Western education brought new energy to this inquiry. Freire’s work intertwined several branches of thought pertaining to educational practice, oppression, and liberation. In response, educators committed to Marxism, feminism, civil rights, and identity politics picked up the challenge, exposing unspoken forces at play in classrooms and laboratories. This scrutiny, though, has not been applied with equal thoroughness to the acting studio. What questions are particular to—or particularly charged in—the training of actors?

This book, *The Politics of American Actor Training*, has gone through many stages of development, and the authors in it have brought to it the force of their own motives and divergent ideas. But it should be noted that Paulo Freire’s influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, underlies all formal discussion of power in education. Contemporary educators in all disciplines have been inspired and challenged by Freire’s rejection of the teacher–student dichotomy and his model of a symbiotic, reciprocal relationship between students and teachers. In the field of acting, one might find special resonance in the multiple connotations of the verb “to act,” or respond to Freire’s notions of the student as a social Subject, acting upon his or her environment. Freire asserted a “culture of silence” within which colonized people—and in the “colonized” Freire includes, by extension, students—are granted limited vocabularies and expressive channels, and are thus cut off from access to centers of power or means to mobilize. One doesn’t have to stretch these notions very far to suggest similar limitations and oppressions in the looming presence of the theatre profession, with its scant opportunities, devaluing of rigorous training, and unpredictable points of entry. At the outset, then, Freire’s ideas served as both specific models and metaphors for the theatre.

At the same time, the last few years have seen the inevitable changes in performance/cultural theory and in related fields.³ With the publishing cycle for theatre journals much faster than for books, and the online culture

blogs changing our thinking faster than either journals or books, there is a lag time between when ideas become current, when they are advanced in the print media, and when they are implemented in an acting program or rehearsal. The editors' intention for this book is neither to be leading-edge in theoretical terms, nor to forge new theory. Where appropriate, the book points existing theory at the acting studio; in other cases, the chapters use other means to bring additional weight to existing conversations.

We have been fortunate in having a rigorous, silent army of anonymous readers at critical junctures, and have been delighted to see our book spark in them such varied theoretical associations and suggestions for further development of our topic. Readers made their own insightful connections with work ranging from Carl Jung's on archetypes and the collective unconscious to Lev Vygotsky's on social learning. Others saw obvious links to cognitive psychology, or urged histories of university systems, degrees, and capitalism. Like the writers in this book, our early readers have brought their own orientations to this political look at current actor training. Although direct treatment of those areas lies outside the purview of this book, readers will find some of the ideas suggested in one or more of the chapters, and we will watch with interest for further work from others on these promising subjects. As it stands, this book aims to add to the robustness and sophistication of American actor training inside and outside America.

* * *

The fourteen chapters fall roughly into two groups. Part I deals with the larger contexts that determine today's U.S. actor training: historical, social, colonial, and administrative. Part II addresses matters of identity as they emerge in classrooms and rehearsal halls: identity politics, access, and marginalization.

The two sections overlap, but they are also linked in their essential concern: the relationship between the distinctive American acting culture and its political subtext. One might argue for almost any chapter to be in the other section, and this is rather deliberate; the two sections are two approaches to the same topic, and are of the same "stuff." We have wanted to come at the politics of U.S. actor education from two directions as a strategy for best surrounding and capturing our subject. Nevertheless, there is enough difference in focus that we are putting the chapters into two sections for the reader's convenience. This is not meant to divide the entries, but only to propose an organization for them.

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

In the West, some of those who gained recognition and fame came into contact with official culture . . . which enthusiastically accepted

them and swallowed them up, as it accepts and swallows up new cars, new fashions, or anything else. In Bohemia the situation is essentially different, and far better than in the West, because we live in an atmosphere of complete agreement: the first [official] culture doesn't want us, and we don't want anything to do with the first culture. This eliminates the temptation that for everyone, even the strongest artist, is the seed of destruction: the desire for recognition, success, winning prizes and titles, and last but not least, the material security which follows.

Ivan Jirous, *A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival*, 1975⁴

Culture is politics.

Tom Stoppard, *Introduction to Rock 'N Roll*, 2006⁵

In America, we do not describe the relationship between authorities and artists in terms of first and second, or official and unofficial cultures, but we know we have these separate cultures, that they are in contact, and that the goal of their contact is material security. Instead of those words, we speak in terms of government subsidies and university support, grants, and endowment awards—language that attempts to communicate its own kind of “atmosphere of complete agreement.” Nevertheless, it barely masks some disquieting truths: that the cultural system that forces the interdependence of authorities and artists often hobbles both, that cultural activity has no organic function in our society so that organizations funding the arts do so from self-interest, that the support from above shifts the artist's focus from community to money, that funding inequities seriously divide artists among themselves, and that our artists are sometimes forced to strike some devilish bargains with those with power to make the leap from surviving to thriving.

In Part I, our concern is how these larger dynamics surface in actor training. The following questions served as points of departure: What are the economic realities at work where training programs use their financial status to substantiate their excellence? How has actor education adapted to the business model where the student–teacher relationship changes to an employer–employee one? Does a pedagogical vision of inspiring responsible, resistant thinkers extend to the acting class? Do teachers in a conservatory setting have an obligation to indoctrinate students into the traditional power relationship in the professional theatre? Are instructors obliged to interact with the marketplace, or to ignore it? Does the unlikelihood of earning a living as an actor cause us to preach a conformist mindset out of fear for our students' futures? What are the limits of responsibility when preparing students for life in a profession that barely sustains itself economically?

Further: How do actor training programs regard non-traditional casting practices, such as colorblind casting? Should teachers acknowledge race when choosing material for scene study, and if so, are minority students then underserved if they do not train in the classic plays of the European

theatre? Even as training nationally becomes less centered on the Stanislavsky legacy of psychological realism, how can we extend our new forms of training to embody true plurality?

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

I feel that even the current token adherence to “multiculturalism” is often little more than a patronizing capitalist designation for “The Other.” But we also witness serious inquiry in which the dogmas of the past are rethought and debated. Indeed, the periphery is affecting the center in many ways, and previously marginalized cultures are not only influenced by but also act upon the mainstream culture. New paradigms are called for, and new artists will find them, and new critics will have something to write about.

Peter Selz, *Beyond the Mainstream*⁶

In some segments of the country, current discourse is energetically highlighting the politics of representation in the theatre, from perspectives including black studies, feminist studies, queer studies, and disability studies. In other parts of the country, such conversation about “cultural identity” is still in the future. In segments of the nation in which those identity issues have been at the forefront for some years, there is already, as scholar Michael Millner writes, “a sense of exhaustion around the whole project of identity.”⁷ Still other people fear that this exhaustion will lead to dismissal of the concerns expressed in the argument around identities, long before they have been meaningfully addressed.⁸ Ultimately, with identity politics variously yesterday’s, today’s, or tomorrow’s news, we can only say that some of this thinking has made its way into the professional theatre—at least into the non-profit theatre—in a lasting way. As for actor training across the nation, it remains largely unchanged in this regard.

It was felicitous for the editors that one of our astute, unnamed readers expressed a position that will strike a familiar note for many:

Special pleading by one or another excluded group—the multicultural agenda of the 1980s—is no longer enough. (It never was!) It’s not just a matter of “access” or “casting policies” within programs. MFA programs would turn their backs on their mandate if they began accepting lots of disabled actors and completely ignored dominant cultural values in their casting policies; that’s the hard reality. This is about institutional power in the academy and its links to global capital.

Although these comments are limited to university programs, they can be made about all actor training programs, since all necessarily contend with defining their relationships to the dominant culture. Not contending with it aligns a program with conventional forces by default. As the

demographics of the United States change at record speed, this not-contenting becomes increasingly less tenable, both ethically and practically. Therefore it remains an urgent project for those of us in the acting field to gather useful language and concepts to articulate the changes around us, to keep our actors training in ways that connect them to the world both as it was, and as it is.

With that project in mind, we looked for questions and answers that might move us forward. These questions provided the impetus for Part II: How are gender, class, and race expressed and perpetuated in acting studios and training programs? What physical and/or vocal gestures of race, class, gender and sexuality do teachers reinforce or even require their students to perform? Are teachers obligated to train young men and women to fit the world of images (physical types, gender roles) likely to be recognized and readily consumed in the professional theatre or the entertainment industry? What cultural assumptions do teachers pass along to students regarding what an actor looks and sounds like? What codes are at work in their communication? How do choices about dramatic literature used in training affect a student's ideas about his or her own potential?

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHAPTERS

Any inquiry into American actor training is likely to touch on our theatre's consumption of Konstantin Stanislavsky's work, around and against which much American training has defined itself. In her chapter "Stanislavsky and Politics: Active Analysis and the American Legacy of Soviet Oppression," Sharon Marie Carnicke notes that "mistaken assumptions still hold," assumptions that can be traced in part to politics as the term is ordinarily construed. Presenting research that will break new ground for many readers, Carnicke traces in historical terms the political dynamics that defined and limited Western reception of Stanislavsky. Looking at Soviet propaganda as a force behind the mis-transmission of Stanislavsky, Carnicke notes that governmental policies allowed the Moscow Art Theatre to bring only Realist productions (as opposed to more controversial works in its repertoire) to the United States in the 1920s. Additionally, she describes a conflict between two of Stanislavsky's assistants whose differing views of the master teacher's work and inter-personal conflicts ultimately determined how the Method of Physical Actions prevailed, in its dissemination throughout Europe and the U.S., over the method of Active Analysis.

The nature of cultural exchange emerges as a theme in other chapters as well. Chandradasan, one of India's leading directors and theatre scholars, offers his forceful perspective on "The Influences of American Theatre Training on Indian Theatre," delineating how Western funding agencies in India have served to de-politicize and deracinate theatrical forms that had previously been both politically grounded and deeply connected to

community and place. Citing American granting practices and global economic factors, Chandradasan describes the impact of American capitalism on the Indian theatre of the last half-century. Chandradasan also offers a window onto the appropriation of South Asian dance forms by the American avant-garde in the 1960s, and the problematic effects of introducing to formal theatre education in India a “professionalism” modeled on Broadway norms far afield from the realities and values of Indian theatre.

Beyond our nation’s borders, globalization gives us ever-increasing opportunities to interact with diverse theatre traditions, while at the same time extending the reach of American marketing and popular culture. Having spent several years as a visiting professor in Asia in the middle of a long career running a studio in California, Lissa Tyler Renaud is particularly qualified to comment on the subtexts of intercultural educator exchanges. In “The Wild, Wild East: Report on the Politics of American Actor Training Overseas,” Renaud takes a candid look at how American training fares when it is exported for consumption by students whose views of U.S. culture have been determined by translations of uncertain reliability, and whose understanding of theatre education is formed by constantly changing political relations throughout their region and the world. Like Chandradasan, Renaud notes the sometimes corrupting influences of competitive grant opportunities; together, their chapters are an incisive commentary on the ironies of cultural colonialism as it plays out in the studio.

Several of the educators here describe the learning that continues to shape their teaching, much of it at the hands of their own students. With “Actor Training Meets Historical Thinking,” Jonathan Chambers draws on a pivotal teaching moment in his classroom that enhanced his own education and teaching. In a model of engaged pedagogy, Chambers reflects on what he learned from allowing beginning acting students to work on Sarah Kane’s *Crave* despite its uneasy fit with the objective/obstacle model in which they were training. Examining the unspoken hegemony of Realism in the acting classroom, Chambers goes on to unravel assumptions that “the System” is culturally neutral, and documents the experiences that have led him to bring awareness of Realism’s particular and material history into his acting classes. In a poignant counterpoint, Derek S. Mudd, now a doctoral student in performance studies, reflects on the rigidity of approach that marked his experiences as a student in two MFA acting programs a decade apart. Having been failed by instructors who embraced their roles as unassailable experts and refused even to acknowledge their student’s investment in and understanding of the roles he prepared for, Mudd now challenges himself to become a responsive and engaged theatre educator.

This field may be especially anxious because of the economic realities that bear on the American artist and actor. In a challenging chapter, Leigh Woods reflects on the history of formal training programs within the academy over the past three decades and the ways in which such programs address—or fail to address—the realities of students’ potential careers. To

move past current limitations, Woods suggests community-oriented projects through which acting students might be guided to wider ambitions and their talents directed to serve a sense of community that includes but is not confined to art and the academy. In this way, writes Woods, "Acting can be reconceived as a kind of common language spoken . . . by many."

Also arguing for inclusivity half a world away from the theatres where Chandradasan notes that Western "professionalism" is a mixed blessing, Ellen Margolis considers both the politics of professionalism in the theatre and the assumptions of the academy, two dovetailing sets of beliefs that marginalize adults with family or other personal obligations and systematically drive individuals with full personal lives out of her profession. In "Arrested or Paralyzed? Reflections on the Erotic Life of an Acting Teacher," Margolis connects the special imperatives of theatre education to her experiences of being transformed by the insistent presence of her students.

From her perspective of over thirty years of professional and academic theatre work in the U.S. and abroad, Lissa Tyler Renaud shines a harsh light on the confusing and corrosive effects of the marketplace on aspiring actors. In her "Training Artists or Consumers? Commentary on American Actor Training," Renaud looks at changes in a profession overcome by commercialization, and at training that needs to adapt to technology and to a generation of acting students who are unconvinced that they need a real education in theatre, the arts, or the humanities. Challenging us to dignify the field of actor training with antidotes to the anti-intellectualism and cheap over-specialization that prevail, Renaud argues for the importance of a multi-disciplinary, historically-informed actor training in every sort of studio.

With "Beyond Race and Gender: Reframing Diversity in Actor Training Programs," David Eulus Wiles asserts that the academy has deeply internalized the rules of the commercial marketplace and the stereotypes prevalent in the larger society when it comes to actor training, especially at the graduate level. Arguing for the most progressive possibilities of higher education, Wiles notes that theatre educators in the academy have the opportunity to challenge and perhaps change notions of what constitutes appropriate appearance onstage. Similarly, in her chapter "'Typed' for What?" Mary Cutler laments that unreconstructed gender roles are unconsciously reinforced in training programs through teachers' selection of material, and that instructors' anxieties for their students' futures are especially manifest in the narrow range of material selected for the American College Theatre Festival's national scholarship program. Inspired by Rhonda Blair's feminist critiques of actor training, Cutler takes up the challenge of helping to liberate her students from limiting stereotypes.

Wiles' and Cutler's contributions resonate with "Changing Demographics: Where is Diversity in Theatre Programs in Higher Education?" in which Donna B. Aronson describes her efforts and successes at encouraging greater diversity in theatre at her former home institution in Texas,

prompted by concerns that her department did not reflect the largely Hispanic makeup of its campus or the local community. Aronson's desire for an inclusive model has led her to consider how theatre programs might go beyond desegregating; here she suggests how theatre might be used to encourage diversity and enhance communication throughout a campus community. A past president of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Aronson also reflects on the worthy journey that lies ahead for the profession at large.

Several of our contributors describe the real impediments confronted by actors from traditionally under-represented groups and offer visions for pertinent cultural change. In a chapter at the crossroads of the practical and political, Victoria Ann Lewis chronicles the achievements of a number of disabled actors-in-training, and of the instructors who came to appreciate that their vocabularies were enhanced and assumptions challenged by working with these students. As a documentarian and activist for this population within the theatre community, Lewis goes on to present a manifesto for access. Similarly, in a chapter aimed at helping professional and academic training programs to enhance the quality of preparation offered to their Latino students, Micha Espinosa and Antonio Ocampo-Guzman examine how programs in the United States currently train actors of Latino heritage. Here, the authors identify three signal challenges: the complexities of bilingualism, complicated and conflicting messages Latino actors are likely to have internalized about their own physicality, and the particular difficulties of preparing Latino students to work in an industry that tends to relegate these actors to stereotypic roles.

Venus Opal Reese's "Keeping It Real Without Selling Out: Toward Confronting and Triumphant Over Racially-Specific Barriers in American Acting Training" proposes a training approach designed to serve racially- and historically-conscious African American playwrighting. Drawing on Ron Eyerman's theorizing of collective trauma as cultural memory, Reese deliberately works against an idea of traditional European/American acting that she associates with "emptying out," instead inviting students—through improvisation, writing exercises, and class discussion—to bring their full and authentic voices to any role.

CONCLUSION

It has not been our purpose to exhaust this enormous topic in this one book, but to provide those in actor education with a rich and engaging way into a larger, inevitable conversation. Even a book such as this one, with an inclusive philosophy, does not attempt to cover each minority population, or each disability, or each of any underrepresented group. The effects of American training are observable in many more cultures globally than have been discussed here. Sometimes there have been complex obstacles to

securing input from members of groups not used to being approached. In any case, we found that the chapters included work together well to offer an adventurous survey of trends in thinking on the subject. We hope our selection of chapters will heighten awareness of many other voices, while engaging everyone interested in how American theatre training expresses our national identity, in the globalization of arts education policy, and in the politics of curriculum decisions wherever our actor training is keeping American actors relevant.

NOTES

1. Michael Janeway, "Who's Teaming Up in the Tug-of-War Among the Two Theatre Sectors, Pop Culture and the Press." *American Theatre* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, December 2000), 86.
2. Ibid., 87.
3. On this point, two books deserve special mention for their ambitious scope and rigorous application of theory: Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement's *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter*, and more recently, Ann Elizabeth Armstrong and Kathleen Juhl's *Radical Acts: Theatre and Feminist Pedagogies of Change*.
4. Ivan Martin Jirous, "A Report on the Third Czech Musical Revival." *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*. Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospisyl, eds. (Cambridge, MA, and London, England: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and MIT Press, 2002), 56–65. Quoted in Tom Stoppard's introduction to his *Rock 'n' Roll*, revised edition (London, England: Faber and Faber, 2006) xx.
5. Stoppard, *Rock 'n' Roll*, ibid., xix.
6. From Peter Selz's introduction to his *Beyond the Mainstream: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Art* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 10.
7. The full passage from Michael Millner's "Post Post-Identity" reads: "If the 1990s were characterized by a rich and sophisticated reconceptualization of identity—as performative, mobile, strategically essential, intersectional, incomplete, in-process, provisional, hybrid, partial, fragmentary, fluid, transitional, transnational, cosmopolitan, counterpublic, and, above all, cultural—the new millennium has been frequently marked by a sense of exhaustion around the whole project of identity. The fatigue is palpable even among some of those left cultural critics most responsible for identity's ascendancy. Terry Eagleton's recent *After Theory* (2003) closes with a call to move on: cultural theory 'cannot afford simply to keep recounting the same narratives of class, race and gender, indispensable as these topics are. It needs to chance its arm, break out of a rather stifling orthodoxy and explore new topics.'" *American Quarterly* Volume 57, Number 2 (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, June 2005), 541.
8. Writing on his blog about "Gay Male Poetry Post Identity Politics," poet Reginald Shepherd posted: "When I told a friend about this [Association of Writers and Writing Programs] panel, he said, 'No one sent me the memo that racism, heterosexism, and class struggle had ended and thus we can now put that silly business [of] the politics of identity behind us.' I told him he should check his mail more regularly, as lots of people have sent out that particular memo." At <http://reginaldshepherd.blogspot.com/2008/02/gay-male-poetry-post-identity-writer-politics.html>.

Part I

